

*Instead of avoiding  
all conflict, teachers  
should allow students  
to work through  
conflict to create new  
learning opportunities.*

Jefferson, people have long recognized the importance of conflict as it relates to progress.

Educational philosophers and theorists, too, have seen the powerful roles that discord and cognitive discomfort play in one's capacity to learn and to move into increasingly sophisticated arenas of thought. Conflict carries a powerful currency when a teacher remains open and cognizant of its capacity to spur learning. Why, then, do so many classrooms lack the special kind of conflict that might lead to new intellectual heights? Why would some teachers continue to ignore such a potential boon to student learning? And where is the conflict—the revolu-

he face his obviously naïve, romantic expectations about the glory and intrigue of war. Because they face external challenges that spin them inevitably into internal conflicts, these two boys become someone new by the end of their stories. After facing situations that pricked at their souls and opting to deal creatively and constructively with those problems, they progress in meaningful and unpredictable ways.

In literary terms, one might refer to the dilemmas facing fictional characters such as Huck and Henry as *complications*. In educational terms, the same phenomena operate under many names: cognitive dissonance, creative tension,

# Conflict and Resolution: Catalysts to Learning

by Kevin B. Kienholz

**T**homas Jefferson, tied to his past and driven forward by his need for change, claimed that he liked "a little revolution now and then. It is like a storm in the atmosphere." He recognized the ironic nature inherent in conflict that makes it both destructive and constructive at the same time. He knew that the roots of progress and change rest firmly embedded in the soil of confrontation. And he understood that discord necessarily precedes change, encourages it, and serves as the catalyst for action. From homespun philosophy claiming that "one can't make a cake without breaking some eggs" to a renaissance thinker such as

tion—that may stand as no less than an essential prerequisite to progress?

## Literature, Learning, and the Case for Conflict

Writers and thinkers in many diverse arenas have made the case for conflict. Literature provides countless examples of the transformative power of strife. Huckleberry Finn (Twain 1884) encounters situations that force him to confront his own prejudices and question comfortable traditions. Henry Fleming, the main character and focal point of *The Red Badge of Courage* (Crane 1895), finds himself in situations demanding that

anomaly, discrepant events, cognitive conflict, disequilibrium, growing pains. The list of labels continues indefinitely, yet the basic premise remains essentially the same: Students confronted by new and unfamiliar circumstances and who find themselves listing even slightly off-center will naturally attempt to make sense of their situations and, in doing so, transform their view of the world. They will construct new ideas and theories, and they, too, will progress. Jefferson's storm will have had its desired effect, stirring up the students' atmosphere and placing things in new relationships to one another.



The notion of crisis leading to progress is neither new nor specific to educational theory. In fact, Thomas Kuhn keyed upon the idea to explain his theory of scientific revolution. Conflict, he claimed, lay at the heart of all significant paradigm shifts; it stands as a prerequisite to genuine and meaningful change. As

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Kuhn (1962, 77) suggested, "Crises are a necessary precondition for the emergence of novel theories." Though he remained primarily interested in a large-scale, long-term vision that could effectively account for forward advances in the sciences, Kuhn clearly appreciated the fact that his macro-theory could hold true on a micro-level—it works for the individual as well as for the system. As Kuhn (1962, 79) also noted, "Like artists, creative scientists must occasionally be able to live in a world out of

joint." For Kuhn, that necessity was "the essential tension" implicit in scientific research. Kuhn thought, quite rightly, that scientific advances arise most vigorously out of rigorous attempts to explain away confusing concepts.

The same premise holds true on a much smaller scale—for the individual student working out problems on his own. John Dewey knew very well that students must tentatively walk in the dark before they can confidently shed light on any new intellectual territory. "Un-

less a given experience leads out into a field previously unfamiliar," wrote Dewey (1938, 79), "no problems arise, while problems are the stimulus to thinking." The teacher must assume a more active role, however, than simply allowing his students to wander aimlessly in search of confusion, to bounce from conflict to conundrum in vain hopes of breaking new ground. As Robert L. Shrigley (1987, 25) noted, putting cognitive dissonance theory "into action in the classroom requires that the students experience temporary dissonance, or frustration, that is consciously planned by the teacher." There is a Deweyan sound to Shrigley's emphasis on the responsibility of the educator and on the critical role he plays in *creating* a safe environment for students in which they, ironically, feel comfortable with the presence of cognitive discomfort.

Although the teacher must create circumstances in which his or her students cannot, at least for a moment, satisfactorily explain unfamiliar phenomena or unexpected ideas, he or she must also foresee a way out and ensure that a safe trail to be blazed by the students actually exists. Neil O. Houser (1996, 298) suggested that "Dissonance of any kind can be uncomfortable, and even in relatively decontextualized educational endeavors, dissonance offered without a backdrop of safety can lead to frustration and fear." Conflict that leads to progress stands as pedagogically sound practice, conflict introduced into a classroom without the hope of resolution seems merely irresponsible.

### **The Case against Conflict**

Some teachers may believe that confusion, no matter how

transient and temporary, should be avoided. Indeed, purposefully introducing tension into the classroom atmosphere potentially further complicates an already chaotic arena. Many teachers' desire for control, or the *appearance* of control, might very well outweigh their willingness to use the power of conflict. The quest for *peace* often wins out over the need for *progress*.

Once students begin to construct their own ideas and views of the world, the teacher loses a certain degree of control. The body of knowledge that might otherwise have been parceled out by the teacher suddenly is up for grabs, and the students incorporate it into their own cognitive frameworks. As Alan M. Frager (1984, 15) recognized, "Tension may be felt and expressed by students who would prefer traditional teaching methods for which the teachers' role is to know and 'cover' a body of knowledge and the students' role is to work hard, read every word, and learn 'right answers.'" Parents also may express tension and displeasure if their children transfer relativistic thought processes beyond school subjects and begin questioning their parents' authority and values.

In many instances, one might safely assume that everyone involved—teacher, student, and parent—may be more comfortable with the teacher retaining control. It remains a safe, comfortable, controllable, and time-honored arrangement. However, it is also largely ineffective.

Though pedagogically sound, the idea of purposefully introducing cognitive dissonance into the classroom may never be widespread practice, because it runs

counter to another long-revered goal of U.S. education: the production of obedient, compliant students. David E. Purpel (1989, 11) noted that "Many see the prime function of education as the transmission of the culture and the preservation of its values. One difficulty with this view is that our culture contains many institutions and value systems, some of which are in conflict." Perhaps Purpel had the schools themselves in mind when he wrote those words. The desire for students who think independently, critically, and imaginatively may be in direct conflict with a simultaneous call for control and regulation in the classroom. A teacher's concerted effort to gain an upper hand may actually preclude the students' capacity to struggle through problems in their own way and at their own pace. As Gerald Graff (1992, 11) argued, "Good teachers, after all, *want* their students to talk back. They know that student docility is a far more pervasive problem than student intransigence." The student who appropriately, creatively pushes for his own answers does not worry Graff; the student, however, who simply accepts the ideas of the teacher—wholesale and without thought—does worry him, and with good reason.

### **The Cost of Passivity and Tranquility**

As evidenced by the generally accepted link between high scores on standardized tests and the appearance of high achievement, schools place a great premium on knowing correct answers. But at what cost do we support such an arrangement? Teachers rob their students of any chance to make

meaningful connections for themselves when cognitive conflict is not allowed in the classroom. "Knowing the right answer requires no decisions, carries no risks, and makes no demands," claimed Eleanor Duckworth (1987, 64). "It is automatic. It is thoughtless." When knowledge that Piaget (1950) referred to as logico-mathematical is presented as social knowledge, the life is effectively removed from the learning process.

When ideas and concepts dependent upon viable, dynamic relationships are treated as fixed and static, then the student is effectively removed from the process and functions only as a receptacle of knowledge rather than a creator of ideas. Teaching and learning become matters of transfer rather than transformation. Unfortunately, this may be the rule rather than the exception for too many learners. Frager (1984, 15) suggested that most students view knowledge as "quantitative, independent of contexts, and possessed in superior quantities by teachers, so that students may learn much but never know as much as their teachers." When the struggles involved in genuine learning are removed from the shoulders of the students, the information becomes lifeless.

## The Choices

In many respects, U.S. educational practices appear poised between two worlds, unwilling to commit fully to one camp or the other. We value the comfort of the venerable, teacher-centered school while tacitly nodding assent to those who patiently remind us that students must be allowed to work their own ways through the confusion, free from the heavy-handed

direction of the teacher. As Constance Kamii (1981, 78) suggested, "In the traditional view, the child is believed to acquire moral values by internalizing them from the environment." Kamii (1981, 78) added that, according to Piaget, "children acquire moral values . . . by constructing them from the inside, through interaction with the environment." When teachers relinquish some degree of control and allow students to interact freely with their environments (Piaget 1950), conflict and disequilibrium become inevitable by-products. As a natural consequence, new opportunities for learning become unavoidable, as well as new challenges for the teachers.

Still, educators must be willing to take the first step, allowing students the freedom to interact genuinely with their surroundings. They must give up a degree of perceived control—a step many educators are unwilling to risk. Just as we acknowledge the important role conflict plays in the learning process, we value the passivity that comes from treating knowledge as fixed and static. We want our students to be inquisitive in the name of "individuality" but docile in the name of "citizenship."

We hope that our students will emerge from their formal schooling as independent and critical thinkers but rarely give them the chance to exercise such freedom. Perhaps, out of these conflicting goals, a new outlook and approach to teaching will emerge. Kuhn might suggest that just such a set of seemingly irreconcilable positions could give rise to a fundamental adjustment in perspective that will afford more opportunities for students to delve into cognitive

discord and emerge with new understandings.

And so, just as Mark Twain allowed Huckleberry Finn to set sail down the Mississippi River, slipping past Cairo in the dark and into unfamiliar territory, we must let our students embark on their own intellectual journeys. In the same way Stephen Crane stood idly by while his young Henry Fleming fought his way through the Civil War and his own personal battles, we must give our students the same freedom to struggle in their learning. In the process of creating safe and manageable intellectual crises, teachers will offer their students opportunities to engage new arenas of understanding, move out from under the shadows of their teachers and their own outdated ideas, and grow up intellectually. Given the chance, they will learn to slip comfortably between conflict and resolution and learn for the rest of their lives.

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